

The Knight of Columbus



Lecture by

Rev. T. E. Mela, D. D.

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Worthy Lecturer, Rev. Fathers, Brothers:



THE task imposed upon me this evening is to speak to you on a live topic—"The Knight of Columbus"—a most useful and interesting subject.

What is generally understood by a Knight of Columbus? What are supposed to be his distinguishing traits, his peculiar characteristics? What does the Church expect of him? According to my conception of him, a Knight of Columbus first of all must be a gentleman; second, a Catholic gentleman; third, a Catholic Knight. Three points upon which I shall briefly dwell this evening, and for which I beg your kind attention.

Brothers! I claim no infallibility for myself, yet, I candidly believe, that after I shall have described to you the Knight of Columbus, as is given to me to fancy him, you will readily admit, that, such would be indeed the ideal Knight to copy; and that great credit and honor would accrue to our order, if we would all bend our efforts to transplant that ideal knight, from the realm of fancy to that of fact.

PART I.

Brothers, the Knight of Columbus as I have just stated, must first be a Gentleman; that is, as the term itself implies, he must be gentle and a man. The idea we derive from the word "man" is that of something strong and powerful, not so much physically as morally. When, therefore, I say that we must be men, I mean, that we must be what Shakespeare meant, when he said: "I dare do all that may become a man." I mean that we must be what the dramatist in Hamlet meant when he exclaimed: "He was a man, take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again." I mean that we must be what Whittier meant, when he cried out, "When faith is lost, when honor dies, the man is dead!"

Brothers, let us be men! It matters not whether we are prodigies of talent or of limited brains: Character is higher than intellect. It matters not whether we have attained to a high degree of education, or had no schooling—moral qualities count more than knowledge. It matters not whether we are possessed of riches, or are common day laborers,—a good name is better than wealth. But what does matter, Brothers, is in what degree, as men, we succeed to control our animal power; in what degree, as men, we succeed to curb and subdue our passions; in what degree, as men, we stand by the eternal principles of justice and right; in what degree, as men, we are masters of ourselves.

It is by the strength of the soul that we can judge a man. He, who always does what is right no matter what the consequences may be; who lives up to his convictions, always thinking, saying and doing what his conscience tells him is right, Brothers, he is a man and unless we be men in this sense, we cannot call ourselves men, and are lacking one of the requisites that go to form a gentleman.

To be gentlemen, we must, moreover, be gentle. Gentleness is an essential element in a gentleman, just as gentlemanliness is one of the basic principles that go to make a Knight. If we wish, then, to be gentlemen, we must learn to be gentle. "He is gentle," says the poet, "that doth gentle deeds." A rude man may be good, but a good and gentle man is better. Gentleness is the perfume of life. She is the twin sister of Charity. Whatever Charity forbids, gentleness forbids it also. Far from us, therefore, Brothers, those harsh manners which would hurt our neighbor's feelings, create antipathies, beget disgust. Far from us those remarks which would mar the reputation of others, engender enmities, and sow discord. "Let mildness," says Teogius, "ever attend our tongue." He is gentle, who proves himself ever courteous, ever meek, ever affable; whose manners and words, at home as well as in society, show a man of mild disposition, be it natural or acquired; a man who will check his temper, refrain his tongue, avoid profanity, and by his countenance command respect. Brothers, let us be gentle and men and we shall be gentlemen. We should not, however, entertain for a moment the mistaken idea that a gentleman must have no more backbone than a dish-rag, tolerating and permitting wrong,

for fear he might injure the feeling of some brute. Such conduct is cowardice and a thing most heartily despised by a true gentleman.

To be gentlemen, we must combine the mildest manners with the bravest mind, as Homer puts it. We must have a soul stronger and nobler than our body. The body must not be master of the soul. The soul must govern the body. Only then, Brothers, when the soul is able to govern and direct the forces of the body, when it can check and control our animal passions, we can pride ourselves on the noble title of gentleman.

PART II.

Brothers, we must be gentlemen, but this is not enough. Our order being a Catholic organization, it follows that to be true Knights of Columbus, we must also be Catholics. Catholics, not merely in the sense of being baptized Catholics, but as being imbued with thoroughly Catholic spirit. This, implies, that we should not be content with a purely speculative adherence to the truths of our holy religion, but that we ought to let Faith as an active moral force permeate, like leaven, all our life in all its varied manifestations. The Knights of Columbus are the exponents of the foremost Catholic laymen, and therefore, is expected of them a very high standard of Faith. They must be practical Catholics. I say "Practical Catholics," because unfortunately there are many who are Catholics in name only. None of these, should ever

attempt to join our order; nor should we, in any way encourage them to do so. To be a nice fellow, who once in a while goes to church, may be a qualification good enough to make him a candidate in other social organizations; but should never be considered a standard high enough for us. Let us not, Brothers, for the sake of quantity, overlook the essential qualities required in our members. We stand out as the foremost Catholic laymen of the Church; let us prove to the world that we are such. Let Faith, be as it were, the heavenly compass that guides our lives and our actions. Let us be Catholics in mind, Catholics in deeds, Catholics in thought, Catholics in speech. Let us live up to Catholic teaching. Let us be Catholics not only in the privacy of the family, or when among our Catholic friends, but also in public, among strangers and foes, when duty demands it. Let us be Catholics, not only when by it, we may gain influence, favor, or pecuniary advantages, but also when it should cost us material losses or the alienation of dear friends. Let us be Catholics, always and everywhere. Do we pass before a Church? Let us raise our hat and thus show our Faith in the Divine Prisoner of the Tabernacle. Do we happen to be in a restaurant on a Friday or fast day, for our meals? Let us not be ashamed to observe the law of abstinence. Are we asked to help some good cause? Let us give according to our means. We are not expected to do more. But what we give, we should give freely, gladly, without murmuring.

A Knight of Columbus shows his religious spirit even in the interior of his home. As soon as you go in, you notice at once that you are in a Catholic home

and feel the Catholic atmosphere. There, the sacred pictures are not relegated to the attic, but occupy the prominent place that is becoming them. When you enter a Catholic home and find a great display of profane articles, nude cupids and psyches, but no room for a crucifix or other religious emblems, not even in the bedrooms, believe me, Brothers, the Catholic temperature there, must be very low, if it is not at zero.

A Knight of Columbus should be known particularly for his tender affection and love towards Holy Mother Church. The son, who does not love his mother, who does not show respect to her, who is to her a cause of anguish and tears, is not very much of a son. Likewise, a Catholic, who does not love his Mother, the Church, who does not stand by her in her trials, who never says a word in her defense, who impugns her motives, questions her rights, cannot be much of a Catholic. He is rather a thorn in the Church's sides, a weak spot in the tower of her strength, a broken spoke in the wheel of her progress.

A Knight of Columbus always stands ready to do his share towards the support of his Church and his pastor. He does not manage to sneak about or bring forth excuses to free himself from that obligation. He knows too well that, such is the duty imposed upon him by the very faith which he professes to believe in: a duty, as binding on him, as any that our religion imposes.

To pretend to be a Catholic, while refusing to make the necessary pecuniary sacrifices which religion inevitably entails, is to show a cheap brand of Christianity, so cheap, in fact, that it is hardly worthy of the name.

A Knight of Columbus always entertains the deepest

respect for his Priests. He never attempts to sit in judgment upon them. Whenever he meets them, he never misses the opportunity to greet them courteously; more so, if they happen to be a Brother Knight.

He is always kind to them. He is to them a sincere friend, a dear brother; always ready to help them, to advise them, to console them, to encourage them, and to render easier for them the task which God has entrusted to their hands. Never make much, Brothers, of those Knights who always find fault with their Priests. Something must be wrong with them. Priests are not infallible. They may eventually commit mistakes. Yet, true Knights never turn against them; they are always the defenders of their pastor, and the mainstay of their parish.

Brothers, let us be practical Catholics. It is of paramount importance that we should be so. To this end, let us always keep burning within us the sacred light of Faith. It will enlighten us in our duties, strengthen us in our resolves, guide us in the straight path of virtue, and enable us to reach the goal to which we must all aspire, that of being Catholic gentlemen.

PART III.

Another step, Brothers, before we shall be full fledged Knights of Columbus. We must also be knights of the Church. In the age when knighthood was in flower, a Knight meant a man of noble mind, of courageous will, of undaunted spirit, unblemished honor and religious faith, and this is also, as I under-

stand it, the test that is required of a Knight of Columbus.

A Knight of old was expected to speak the truth, to maintain the right to protect the distressed, to practice courtesy, to defend the Christian religion. In like manner, the Church looks upon the Knights of Columbus as her co-workers for the spreading of religion, for the advancement of Christian education, for the defense of her doctrines, her rights, her Priests, and her people. What a beautiful mission, Brothers, that of the Knight of Columbus! Is there anything nobler, or more inspiring than to co-operate with the Church by every means at our command, in bringing the knowledge of the true Faith to those of our brethren who are still groping in the darkness of unbelief? We may not all be able to contribute to this noble cause by giving lectures, writing books, editing Catholic magazines, or by sustaining arguments in high religious topics, but we all can and should attain that object by the magnet of our examples, by the earnestness of our convictions, by the sternness of our purposes, by giving our mite towards spreading among the people Catholic books and Catholic literature.

What is there more in keeping with the tenets of our Order than to work for the advancement of religious education? Great, as is the mission of those lovers of humanity, whose lifelong studies and efforts are spent in the relief of physical misfortunes; the mission of elevating the human mind to a higher plane of conception of our relations with God, or dependency upon and duties to Him, our accountability and last end is far greater. Greater, as the soul is superior to the body; greater, as the intellect is above physical

strength; greater, as eternity stands higher than time. And it is refreshing, indeed, Brothers, to think how much good in his respect has already been accomplished by the Order. Splendid achievements for an organization, in the springtime of its existence! But while endeavoring to help others to advance their religious education, we must not neglect ourselves. In the matter of religious training there is always room for improvement. The more we study our religion, the better we shall understand it, the more we shall like it, and the dearer it shall be to us. The more we love our religion, the more we will practice it and the readier it will find us to stand by it. And, here, Brothers, is suggested another reason why we should all strive to render ourselves fully conversant with its tenets. Because we are expected to fight for it. Yes, it is our privilege as well as our duty as Knights of Columbus to take up the defense of the Church against her enemies. Consider how numerous they are! How powerful! How bold and cunning in their attacks! They do not leave a stone unturned to cause her ruin. Impotent as they are, to shake the solid foundation upon which she is built, they contrive by all sorts of falsehoods, calumnies and misrepresentations, to weaken the solidity of her dogmas, to becloud the beauty of her teachings, to besmirch the sanctity of her morals, to question the justice of her rights. While claiming for themselves all the freedom and protection that the Constitution of our country can give, they would, if it were in their power condemn, force her to inactivity, in order to nullify her efforts, to lessen her power, to retard her progress, to stem the tide of her success. In the face of such malicious, unjust,

unwarranted attacks upon our Church, it is meet and dutiful that we, Knights of Columbus, both collectively and individually, should rise to the sacredness of our pledges, and with all that is best in us, with all means at our disposal, should resist and turn to naught the wanton attempts upon our Church, our liberties and our rights. I said collectively and individually because, though our activity as an organization, will develop along lines, as will suggest the strength of the number, the high standard of the membership, the powerful influences of the Order; the contribution of the Knights, as individuals, is none the less desirable and may have a great bearing on the ultimate triumph of our cause. As an organization, we shall make ourselves heard by the masses; as individuals, we shall cause the neighbor, the friend, the fellow-laborer, to stand up and take cognizance of our rights. Brothers, let the spirit of a Christian Knight pervade all our being and act as a spur to action. Great is the task before us. But let us not be disheartened. Let us not prove cowards and retreat to the enemy's camp. Let us not prove stragglers in the ranks and fall by the wayside. Let us be game. Let us fight for the honor of our Church, for the justice of her claims, for the vindication of her rights, for the defense of her Priests and people and we shall be Catholic Knights.

Brothers, I have sketched before you the picture of the Knight of Columbus. I portrayed to you as far as time limitation permitted, the firmness and gentleness of his character, the manner of his life, the nobility of his aspirations and work. I have thus accomplished the task, which, I proposed to myself in the beginning, to show you in a Knight of Columbus, a

gentleman, a Catholic gentleman, and a Catholic Knight.

Before closing, however, allow me, Brothers, to congratulate you on the good judgment you have shown by joining the Knights of Columbus. It shows on your part, an elevating tendency towards ideals which form the pride of the Order; a nobility of thought which, while it is a credit to you, confers prestige upon the organization that has received you into her bosom. The Knights of Columbus stands in the van of all fraternal societies and shines out conspicuously for the great achievements accomplished in less than half a century of its existence. Be proud, therefore, Brothers, of your Order. Be loyal to it. Do it honor, by a life ennobled by courageous, Christian, chivalrous deeds. This will entitle you to the gratitude and admiration of your country, your Church, and your Order, which will rightly look upon you as upright citizens, fearless Catholics and spotless Knights.

